

Chapter Title: Political Theology in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring: Returning to the Ethical

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Book Title: The African Renaissance and the Afro-Arab Spring

Book Subtitle: A Season of Rebirth?

Book Editor(s): Charles Villa-Vicencio, Erik Doxtader, Ebrahim Moosa

Published by: Georgetown University Press. (2015)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15hvwmf.13>

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Political Theology in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring

Returning to the Ethical

EBRAHIM MOOSA

Optics in politics is like a picture. It is worth more than a thousand words. On June 30, 2013, Egypt's new military strongman, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, installed himself as president after deposing the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi. This signaled a major turning point in that country's political theology. At his inauguration Sisi was flanked by three important religious figures: Ahmed el-Tayeb, the president or *shaykh* of al-Azhar, the most reputable Islamic university; Pope Theodorus II, the Coptic archbishop; and Younis Makhyoun, the leader of the Salafi al-Nur party. Blessed by three distinct theologies, the general then acted with unrestrained brutality: Under his orders hundreds of protesters were killed during the evacuation of Cairo's streets, followed by ruthless repression of the once-ruling Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) allied to the Muslim Brotherhood. Reports of human rights abuses against political prisoners in Egyptian prisons abound.

The headline story is the return to authoritarianism, although some Egyptians dispute that and call the return of the army a step toward democracy. My goal is to identify the sources of authoritarianism in Arab-Islamic politics. My hypothesis is that while political and economic factors clearly drive politics, there is also a distinct Muslim political theology that lends itself to an authoritarianism that infects both secular and religious regimes. How could it be that the same protesters, by and large, who had taken to the streets and ousted an authoritarian Hosni Mubarak from power barely three years earlier now urged the army to return? And how was it that they chose an army general who was cut from the same cloth as Mubarak to take the reins of power? Why do religious authorities condone the return of authoritarianism? Why did Islamic groups such as the FJP and the

Muslim Brotherhood, who were once victims of authoritarianism, also show during their brief rule of Egypt that they had the capacity to be authoritarian?

Miscalculations of Revolution

Revolutions and counterrevolutions are bloody and brutal affairs. In Egypt the national psyche is divided as to whether the ousting of the democratically elected Morsi of the FJP was a good or a bad thing. Elements of the Egyptian public were sufficiently alarmed by what they had experienced of Morsi's government to want to return to the devil they knew—namely, the military—rather than to follow the devout Morsi whom some suspected to be a wolf in angel's garb. The Egyptian political process has since become so riddled with contradictions and complexity as to make most political analysts scratch their heads. Political psychologists might be in a better position to diagnose the national pathology.

In Libya a stable state apparatus has yet to take charge of the situation. Syria is not only disintegrating under the burden of a civil war but a militant insurgency group known as ISIS, the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq, has proclaimed a caliphate and has taken large chunks of Syrian and Iraqi territory. In Bahrain the lid is brutally shut on all forms of political protest. Only in Tunisia are signs of stability and a gradual movement toward democracy evident. For those whose hopes for an Arab Spring were dashed by the setbacks, the very causes of darkness may someday yield a dawn. As the French political theorist Jacques Rancière points out, "politics is a paradoxical form of action."¹ The line between the power to rule, freedom, and the polis "is not straight but broken."²

Not only did Morsi's epic power grab in some manner facilitate the counterrevolution, but he critically misunderstood several issues. The first is fairly obvious. Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were clueless about the layers of power held by the "deep state" in Egypt. The military in Egypt has the resources, power, and patience to play the long game and use brutal force domestically. When Morsi dismissed General Mohammed Hussein Tantawi as soon as he took power, he was convinced that he had defanged the military establishment and was convinced that he had neutralized their economic interests. He was yet to learn that there is more to democracy and the taking of power than counting the ballots. Morsi so gravely offended the military establishment that they silently vowed to humiliate him even while they were pledging loyalty to him. As importantly, we can see with the advantage of hindsight that the deep state had co-opted an influential section of the religious authorities in Egypt.

Second, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists in the region were blissfully unaware of the deep skepticism political Islam has evoked not only among secular Muslims but also among devout traditional Muslims. For almost a century Muslim thinkers, activists, and those involved in various social movements have

agonized over ways to reshape their societies. Political Islam has emerged as the only political movement with the stamina to reform society into its perception of the demands of Sharia. But the brief reign of political Islam in the Arab Middle East and a glimpse of its potential for authoritarianism might have also signaled its death. Neighboring Tunisia learned from Egypt's failure, and the Renaissance Party there wisely took Sharia debates off the table and withdrew from running the government.

In the future Field Marshal Sisi's jubilant supporters in Egypt might come to regret their decision to oust Morsi from power and opt for the devil they knew—namely, the dictatorial army. Public sentiment can be manipulated in such a way that fear of political Islam carries greater weight than fear of the brutal military power that had ruled Egypt for decades.

The third issue was Morsi's inability to gauge the destabilizing effects of the ever-shifting power contest between Sunni Saudi Arabia (together with Turkey, Jordan, and other Gulf States) and Shia Iran. Iran is viewed as the mortal political enemy by some Sunni majority states. Its nuclear ambitions and its ability to act as a regional power via its proxy, the Lebanon-based Hizbollah, give it military hegemony over Sunni states that have been wary of what they describe as the growth of the "Shia crescent." Iran's political and logistical support for Syria's Bashar al-Asad in a bloody civil war, begun by an uprising of the majority Sunni, all but confirms the sectarian polarization in the region. Because the Sunni states wish to isolate Iran, Morsi's rapid opening of diplomatic ties with Iran might not have endeared him to the Saudis either.

Sedimented Theologies

Deeply embedded in the political practices and actions of Muslim societies are the unspoken and inarticulate sedimentations of different Muslim political theologies. These are not extinguished theological volcanoes. They are active volcanoes—narratives that give coherence to prevailing political behavior. They blend economic and political concerns with vibrant memories and theological discourses that provide answers to deep unresolved aporias in society. The quest for politics within a salvation narrative has been part of Islamic discourse for centuries and has featured prominently in the colonial and postcolonial eras of the twentieth century.

It began with nineteenth-century Muslim reformers who were determined to end external colonial occupation and break the yoke of internal authoritarianism. If the Arab and Muslim peoples freed themselves to some extent from the burden of colonialism, then the challenge awaiting them was to rid themselves of the scourge of political authoritarianism that stalked their lives. Throughout the twentieth century scholars debated the viability of nonauthoritarian models of

governance. But in most cases liberal governance failed to become a serious work in progress.³ However, two distinct as well as overlapping political theologies, each with its own inner diversity, coexisted side by side: secular and Islamist. The secular narrative of salvation was focused on the existence of a strong state, control of religion by the state, and the demands of modernity initially conceived as a socialist economy but later replaced by a liberal political economy. The Islamist narrative of salvation was focused on the supremacy and legitimacy of the Sharia, a strong state, selective use of modernity, and a liberal, if not free-market, political economy.

During the postindependence period, efforts to attain democracy were often derailed. In the context of rising levels of public desperation in several countries plagued by poverty, a growing proportion of youth in the population, and rising unemployment, the 2011 Arab Spring was enthusiastically welcomed. Yet, the Arab Spring also revealed several areas of vulnerability, one of particular importance: the absence of an Islamic political theology compatible with democratic transition. The setbacks and reversals in several countries were caused, among other reasons, by the ruling elites' lack of a deep cultural and political sense of human dignity and their failure to appreciate the value of nonviolent politics and the possibility of reasonable political discourse. In Egypt, one of the largest and most influential Arab countries, the brief Arab Spring heralded a possible end to authoritarian rule that could have influenced other regions. As the draconian political measures now adopted show clearly, Egypt is back in the bosom of authoritarianism. Yet all is not lost.

Sane political calculations in Tunisia enabled the Renaissance Party (Ennahda) to read the tea leaves and retreat from government. They did so in order to reassure a skeptical public who feared they might face an Islamist political agenda.⁴ Tunisia's Islamists were also realists who knew they did not have a silver bullet to solve intractable political and economic challenges. If they did govern, they were bound to fail and thus would gain a reputation of being inept and lacking the imagination to govern effectively.

Muslim Politics

Today's political harvest goes back at least a century, if not longer. A group of Muslim reformers based in Egypt in the last quarter of the nineteenth century contemplated a political future for the Arab Muslim people that would replace the waning Ottoman power and retreating European colonial powers. In reformist circles—in particular the movement of the Iranian thinker known as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), his Egyptian counterpart Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), and the Syrian Rashid Rida (d. 1935)—the end of the Ottoman caliphate was viewed as a major blow to pan-Islamic aspirations. While these reformers did not

always find Turkish domination comfortable, they did believe that a reformed caliphate could steer Muslim nations in the direction of progress. Rashid Rida viewed the founding of the secular Turkish Republic in 1923 as a crushing blow to his hopes of Islamic reform, and it led him to adopt a very critical and increasingly hostile attitude toward secular government.

The reformers nevertheless sought ways to indigenize modern political systems. Their project was to find a modernizing rationale for Islam's moral philosophy, theology, and law. They generated readings of traditional Islamic teachings in order to make these compatible with the demands of a modernizing Muslim public as well as to meet the needs of Muslims with changing experiences. One outcome was to encourage lay Muslims to increase their knowledge of scripture. The reformers also challenged the Muslim clerics, the *ulama*, for being stubborn, resistant to change, and wedded to a static notion of tradition. The reformers petitioned for new investment in intellectual effort (*ijtihad*) to kick-start new modes of thinking and creativity in Islamic theology and juridical ethics, often referred to simply as Islamic law. New pathways in Islamic law often resonated with the rise of scientific cultures and made some headway. But while Muslim societies cautiously embraced science and technology, religious thought itself remained impregnable to innovation and creativity.

One area of thought that did receive some, but clearly not sufficient, attention was Islamic politics. Proposals for a new political order based on Islamic values that resonated with the demands and needs of Muslim communities were in short supply. The political model most Sunni Muslims were familiar with was the caliphate. (It took the 1979 revolution in Iran to stimulate Shiite political thinking, which had been in a quietistic mode for some time.) Simply put, the caliphate was ruled through the personal authority of a legitimate and qualified Muslim leader who sought to impose political order, secure peace, and establish security in Muslim territories. Over the centuries scholars debated the source of the caliph's authority: Was it a divinely ordained office or was the caliph delegated by the Muslim community? This conundrum was not easily resolved; in Sunni thinking it was an office established by tradition whereas in Shia thinking it was an office appointed by divine sanction.⁵ Yet most scholars held the caliphate to be a legitimate political model enjoying the sanction of tradition, the consensus of the community, and the support of the experts in law and theology who derived their ideas from the exemplary practices of the Prophet Muhammad and successive generations of the Muslim community after his death. Doctrinally, the caliphate as a political structure was imagined to substitute for the authority of the Prophet in order to preserve religion and ensure earthly governance.⁶ In other words, the caliphate was viewed as a necessary means for the earthly and otherworldly salvation of Muslims; retaining it was seen as a secular obligation by some and a religious obligation by others. But given the aspiration of some forms of Islamism for world domination, the caliphate and caliphate-like political models always ran the

risk of becoming stranded on the shores of authoritarianism, as Hannah Arendt soberly warned about political regimes heading toward totalitarianism decades ago.⁷

So when Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949) founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, he articulated Islam as both a social gospel and a political movement. His was one of the most powerful articulations of Islam at the popular level and took everyone by surprise: the colonial powers, their governing allies, and the traditional religious leadership of the Muslim world. “Whoever thought that religion, more specifically Islam, is unfamiliar with politics or thinks that politics is not part of its debates,” wrote Banna, “then such a person had wronged himself and his knowledge of this Islam.”⁸ With that announcement Banna not only fueled the debate about Islam and politics in a way that an earlier generation could not do but also polarized Muslim communities into secular and Islamist segments. Of course, Banna’s message was focused on reforming society and retrieving authentic Islamic values in the face of a hegemonic West and its secular cultural imprint on Muslim societies.

Banna’s message, as well as those of the more influential ideologues who succeeded him, such as Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), injected a theological rhetoric into the political. Those Muslims at the helm of secular governance in twentieth-century Egypt, for instance, became the target of the Brotherhood’s ideology-filled rhetoric decrying their lack of Islamic legitimacy. They were subject to imprecations of theological anathematization (*kufir*) for not implementing God’s law, the Sharia, in the public sphere. With the rise of Qutb’s influence the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and the Sharia became a vital element in the rhetorical toolkit of the Brotherhood. By the 1970s the Islamists began to question the secular foundations of the state. In 1971 Egypt’s secular government had to placate religious fervor by amending article 2 of the constitution, explicitly acknowledging that “the principles of the Sharia are a chief source of legislation” in Egypt. The credibility of the Islamic social movements was boosted by the successive military losses and the loss of territory that the Arab-Muslim armies faced at the hands of Israel. Secularists and secular ideology were identified as the weakness and were blamed for the failure of Arab-Muslim will to stand up to their political adversary. By 1980 article 2 was again amended to make Sharia “the chief source of legislation.” Egypt served as a weathervane: The pendulum of political theology in the Islamic world swung away from an aspiration for secular governance and toward Islamism. Repression of Islamism and the brutality meted out to Islamists in Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and Tunisia only made things worse. In the end those who would emerge with the least credibility were the secularists, who left a legacy of monumental failures in governance and are best remembered for their singular contribution to totalitarianism and brutality.

But the place of religion in politics was debated well before the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and should serve as a backdrop to current developments.

Governance in Islam: Theological or Pragmatic?

Calls for Islamic governance in Egypt in 1928 might have been in response to two major events prior to the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood: the publication of a book and the abolition of the caliphate in Turkey. In 1925 a prominent Egyptian thinker, Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888–1966) wrote a book titled *Islam and the Principles of Governance (Islam wa usul al-hukm)*. Abd al-Raziq was a graduate of the famous bastion of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, al-Azhar University. At the time he was head of the Islamic Sharia courts of Egypt and was also familiar with elements of Western intellectual discourse. His purpose for penning the book, he explained, was to reflect on the history of Islamic law and constitutional jurisprudence.

His book was published a year after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Turkey abolished the caliphate, the office of the titular head of the Islamic domains, and declared Turkey a republic on March 3, 1924. The abolition of the caliphate was greeted with different responses in the Muslim world. For many it was a day of mourning because it signaled the end of Islam as empire, despite the fact this empire had been in dire straits for some time. Even prominent Indian figures like Mahatma Gandhi threw their weight and authority behind Indian Muslims who mobilized the Khilafat Movement in an effort to rescue the caliphate, but to no avail. Other Muslims, especially some secular Arabs, were delighted to finally get rid of Turkish domination and were happy to close this chapter in favor of secular options for state formation. But that was by no means a uniform reaction.

Abd al-Raziq's book served as a lightning rod in the traumatic postcaliphate environment. He was viciously criticized, defrocked of his al-Azhar title, and rendered jobless. He raised the fundamental question about the nature and relationship of the Prophet Muhammad's prophetic mission to his political career. The Prophet exercised multiple kinds of authority, he argued. Politics was in his view incidental, not essential, to Muhammad's career. Muhammad engaged in extensive political activities as a prophet. He was at first persecuted in his native city of Mecca and later became the leader of the city of Medina and imposed Islamic suzerainty on neighboring territories. Nevertheless, Abd al-Raziq argued fervently that one had to distinguish between Muhammad's prophecy and his policy as two different and separate types of authority. Muhammad's religious message was inspired by revelation. His political message, while leavened by his religious message, could not equal his moral authority as a prophet. At best one could argue that Muhammad exercised a kind of political leadership, but he did not enjoy a divine mandate for his political office. When pressed, Abd al-Raziq conceded that Muhammad exercised a monarchical function, like some biblical prophets, but even such a function was not essential to his prophecy.

In short, Abd al-Raziq wished to overturn the idea that the office of a caliph was essential to Islam as a religion. While some medieval scholars also held this

view, they favored the caliphate on grounds of tradition.⁹ The term *khalif* in Arabic means successor. Abd al-Raziq argued that Muhammad was never addressed as a *khalif* since he was the Messenger of God. Those who succeeded him were known as *khalif* (pl. *khalifa*)—hence the designation of the long-standing caliphate throughout the history of Islam until its abolition in 1924.

The only acceptable understanding of caliph, Abd al-Raziq contended, was the notion of human beings as *khalifa*, or God's moral stewards on earth. Abd al-Raziq argued there was a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty about the claims scholars made about the nature of the caliphate. First, there was an ancient debate as to whether the caliph's authority derived from God or from an electoral college (*ahl al-hall wa 'l-aqd*) of human beings. In other words, he was skeptical of arguments made by those who claimed that politics had a religious mandate in Islam. Second, he asked why, if the caliphate were a political office, neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet elaborated on the nature of political systems, codes, or ideas. In fact, why did the Prophet not identify a successor or suggest a way in which political succession could be realized? Abd al-Raziq argued that if politics held as important a theological place as the protagonists of the caliphate claimed, then it lacked elaborate foundational teachings to support it. Such teachings were absent precisely because politics was not essential to Islam as a faith. Third, he pointed out that the whole history of the caliphate "was nothing but a catastrophe to Islam and Muslims."¹⁰ Politics, he observed, was based on brute force and authority with hardly any serious effort invested in developing a meaningful political philosophy based on religion.

Among other things, Abd al-Raziq also argued that the office of the caliphate was not part of Muslim doctrine, at least not for Sunni Muslims. Muslims who followed the Shia creed believed the political and spiritual succession after Muhammad was, of course, explicitly designated by the Prophet himself. Shia political theory blamed unscrupulous powermongers among the early Muslims for conspiring against Muhammad's heir apparent, his cousin and son-in-law Ali, and denying him the opportunity to take over the political reins. The debate over succession after Muhammad then became the major point of division between Sunni and Shia Islam. Obviously, as a dyed-in-the-wool Sunni, Abd al-Raziq was unconvinced by the Shi'ite argument over the essential nature of leadership—*imama*—as both political and spiritual.

Muhammad's successors, Abd al-Raziq claimed, wrongly claimed to have succeeded him in his political office when no such political office existed in the first place. If they claimed to rule in the Prophet's name, then they did so only for strategic purposes in order to adopt his religious aura so as to legitimate their political authority. He shows persuasively how the first caliph, Abubakr, was at first called "steward (caliph) of God" but then decried the title as too onerous and arrogant and modestly preferred to be called the "successor to the Messenger/Prophet of God." The change in titles was meant to show how loyal Abubakr was

to the path established by the founder of the community, the Prophet. While Abd al-Raziq did not directly claim Abubakr was acting mala fide, the implicit message was clear: the modest Abubakr knowingly or unknowingly subverted the prophetic tradition and opened the door for later caliphs to make exaggerated claims of being God's shadows on earth.

Abd al-Raziq's central complaint was that Muslim caliphs, with few exceptions, were absolute and autocratic sovereigns who lacked accountability.¹¹ Abd al-Raziq may have been implying it was a good thing that the caliphate ended in 1924. Perhaps he was motivated by modernist impulses, or maybe he tried to sooth bruised Muslim feelings over the abolition of the caliphate by showing the redundancy of the institution. Whatever Abd al-Raziq's motives, his views did not find appeal among Muslim audiences because his revisionist account lacked persuasion. Whether the founding teachings of the Prophet were misunderstood or distorted by later generations, it was difficult to fault an extensive legacy of constitutional jurisprudence as a grotesque misunderstanding. Abd al-Raziq might have fared better had he explained why the caliphate was no longer functional and proposed an alternative model of governance. He opened the door for secular government in Islam by arguing that as long as the moral elements of justice and fairness were adhered to in any system of governance, such a system met the minimum moral requirements of Islam as a religion. Islam never advocated any kind of theocratic authority, he insisted. Abd al-Raziq attempted to rewrite Islam's political theology, though he did not fully succeed in doing so.

Unreconstructed Political Theology

Despite the absence of the caliphate as a model of governance in the twentieth century, within religious sections of Egyptian civil society and elsewhere the aspiration to establish Islamic governance was high. At one stage the idea of the caliphate was conceived as a commonwealth of nations. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), formerly the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, formed in 1969, was supposed to be the vehicle for that aspiration, but it was largely ineffective. However, Islamically inspired social movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi networks, the South Asian Jamat-i Islami, and their allies across the world gained increasing visibility. Within these religiously inspired circles of professional men and women a hybrid Islamic political model was conceived. Muslims would adopt the nation-state modeled on Western conceptions of the state, but they would infuse it with soundings from Muslim political theology based on conceptions of the caliphate. In other words a political theology belonging to an imperial caliphal order was promoted under the guise of the modern nation-state.

Features of this caliphal political theology included the authority of the caliph. In traditional political theology obedience to the authority of the caliph was paramount, and dissent was outlawed as sedition. Subjects were organized in a hierarchy of status, a ranking that discriminated between Muslims and those belonging to other faiths. The question of the role and place of the Sharia in governance and legislation remained a vexed issue in many states, especially as the contest intensified between secular-minded ruling elites and the rising tide of Islamist-minded populations.

So while Muslim-majority nation-states announced citizenship and equality for all, they often failed in practice to provide equal treatment to religious and ethnic minorities. While ancient and early modern caliphal regimes awarded non-Islamic faith communities some autonomy and limited self-rule in certain spheres, there never was a pretense of equality of subjects. Yet, in twentieth-century restatements of Islamic governance those antique notions were to be translated into discourses of citizenship. Constitutions of Muslim-majority states were, in theory, adorned with the notion of equality for people of all faiths and genders, but the reality was often different.

Both secularist and Islamist thinkers in Muslim-majority countries were often hard-pressed to show how they would give equal citizenship and share power with religious minorities. Even secular regimes did not fare better in dealing with religious minorities in a substantive and principled sense. Similarly, the status of women in both politics and the law was another challenge. Again, cultural patriarchy discriminated against women, as did patriarchal laws based on custom and religion.

Political theologies from a caliphal-imperial epoch carry within them cultural and institutional memories embodied in real-life experiences over generations. Without transforming the political and theological cultures by way of revisionist and reconstructionist thinking, even the best political models and institutions can become shipwrecked. One legacy of the premodern Muslim political theology that endured into the modern period was its inherent authoritarian nature that both modern secularist and Islamist political actors inherited and imposed with impunity.¹²

Islamism, Authoritarianism, and the Nation

The long-delayed ideal of a caliphate in the twentieth century found its first stage in the making of an Islamic state, which meant retrofitting the nation-state with Islamic accoutrements and rationales. Advocates of Islamism readily promoted the sovereignty of God rather than the sovereignty of the state or the sovereignty of the constitution. The emblem of God's sovereignty was the application of the

Sharia, the *Grundnorm* of the Islamic state. Often Sharia was imported into existing legal systems unrevised, resulting in appalling transgressions and miscarriages of justice. Yet, in the eyes of Islamists, failing to apply this basic norm meant that both the state and the society languished in heresy and unbelief. Islamism enthusiastically introduced an imperial Muslim political theology as an active political ingredient into the womb of debates about the modern nation-state. Contemporary incarnations of Muslim political theology remained crude and unsophisticated and led to catastrophic consequences everywhere. While outwardly or structurally it appeared modern, inwardly its political philosophy and political culture remained wedded to the ethos of another time. But the idea of an Islamic state had so much power and traction that a range of actors from religious traditionalists to monarchical regimes made some kind of Faustian bargain with Islamism. For politically activist Muslims, especially a new generation of intelligentsia, the simplicity, rhetoric, and power of Islamism to resist the West were its most seductive aspects.

Only some Gulf Arab countries followed a large range of Sharia regulations. But in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan the postindependence political models were secular. Islamic law was confined to family law and related matters. The secular elite was the best equipped and qualified sector to administer and run these modern Muslim countries, as the religious traditionalists were not skilled to run a modern state. But as the twentieth century progressed, the political contestation increased and Islamism challenged the secular order in many countries.¹³

The Iranian revolution inaugurated a new momentum for the Islamization of the state, and this was followed by military takeovers in Pakistan and then Sudan resulting in the greater Islamization of the legal and political systems in both countries. Islamic parties periodically led governments in Jordan and Morocco under monarchical regimes. However, the discourse of oppositional Islamism was often rhetorically emancipatory but authoritarian in practice. When, in 1992, the military in Algeria aborted democratic elections that Islamist parties were poised to win, a decade-long civil war depleted that country's resources and turned Algeria into a mediocre state.

For nearly a century authoritarianism was a concern voiced by opposition groups in the Muslim world, but when in power neither secularists nor Islamists ever made serious efforts to curb it. Rhetorical lip service to liberty was hardly matched by acts of liberty or demonstrable efforts to uphold the sacrosanct character of individual or community rights. Neither the aftermath of the anticolonial struggles nor the Iranian revolution nor other experiments in Islamism have ended authoritarianism. Instead, the unreconstructed Muslim political theologies of a bygone era raised their ugly head to wreak havoc in emerging nation-states—Turkey, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, Egypt—from the 1970s to after the Arab Spring of January 2011. In the more successful democratic Muslim experiments, such as,

for example, the AK Party in Turkey, there are ominous signs of a return to authoritarianism. Hence, there is a need to explore a Muslim political theology that is antiauthoritarian and reaches grassroots communities as a basis for holding leadership accountable.

At least a century ago the theological and ethical call to resist authoritarianism was made by a conscientious and outstanding Syrian scholar, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1848–1902), who wrote a brilliant treatise called *The Nature of Despotism and the Destruction of Subjugation*.¹⁴ As an activist scholar, Kawakibi battled Ottoman despotism and was imprisoned. On his release he became active in the politics of his native city of Aleppo and later joined the reformist movement of Rashid Rida in Cairo. Kawakibi's writings might have greater relevance today than ever before as restless Muslim populations around the world seek theological resources to deepen their resistance to authoritarian rule. In order to give his ideas currency, in 2006 Prince Hasan bin Talal of Jordan established the Al-Kawakibi Democracy Transition Center, which has an active chapter in Tunisia, as Majid's chapter in this book noted.

With an economy of words Kawakibi showed how despotism and subjugation were antithetical to Islamic teachings. Supporting his claims with texts derived from the Qur'an, the prophetic tradition, Muslim political writings, and arguments from reason and common sense, Kawakibi showed how despotism and subjugation were antithetical to Islamic teachings. Despotism succeeded, Kawakibi argued, because despotic regimes took control of knowledge and the education system. He insisted that the most abhorrent form of despotism occurs when learning is replaced by ignorance. This led him to promote the need for a cultural revolution to undo entrenched forms of despotism and authoritarianism, with a view to reconstructing society with freedom at its center.

Religion, Kawakibi pointed out, had a role in advancing the moral and ethical struggle against authoritarianism. He cited a teaching of the Prophet Muhammad, who said, "The moral command (*nasiha*) is the fulcrum of salvation (religion)."¹⁵ Religion in a nutshell, in his view, was all about morality and the pursuit of the ethical. If religion failed to achieve such ends, it turned into the opposite. Kawakibi, in tones reminiscent of Antonio Gramsci, placed the burden of advancing the ethical literacy of society squarely on the shoulders of the intellectuals in order to combat despotism. He disdained those Muslim intellectuals who placed their mastery of language in the service of political sycophancy or focused their energies on the perfection of dogma and matters related to the afterlife while ignoring the material conditions of ordinary people in this world. He reminded his audience that scholars who peddle such ideas are no threat to authoritarian regimes, and he mocked bookish intellectuals "who stored up in their heads vast amounts of information as if they were padlocked libraries."¹⁶ In contrast, he noted, "The despot does indeed tremble at scholars who are the carriers of the *knowledge of*

life such as philosophy (theoretical and applied), rights of nations, the nature of society (sociology), governance (politics), history and rhetoric.”¹⁷

Kawakibi would certainly be disappointed by the turn many intellectuals have taken in Arab Spring countries, especially Egypt, where they celebrated the collapse of democratic rule and favored the return of military rule. Here his warnings about the complicity of the clerical establishment with power were not entirely wrong.

The Clerical Establishment

The relationship between the Islamists and the rank-and-file clerical establishment, the *ulama*, was always a tense one. While the *ulama* periodically and expediently showed solidarity with the goals of the Islamists in their bid to establish a Sharia-based political order, they often found doctrinal grounds to disagree vehemently with Islamists over theology and the interpretation of Islamic law. In Pakistan the standoff between the *ulama* groups and the Jamat-i Islami was legendary, with little love was lost between them. The *ulama* viewed the Islamists as lacking orthodoxy and learned credentials. In a country like Egypt most of the representative *ulama* groups—foremost among them those affiliated with al-Azhar—supported the ruling government in principle but expressed mild dissatisfaction if the government did not comply with their Islamic interpretations. Independent *ulama* groups who fostered a more radical political agenda challenged the authority and the legitimacy of the state from time to time.

The 2012 and 2013 Egyptian constitutions, written under the auspices of the Muslim Brotherhood, praised al-Azhar (in the preamble), guaranteed it autonomy, and declared it to be “the main reference in theology and Islamic affairs” (article 7). The *ulama* at al-Azhar represent a broad range of thinking including orthodox traditionalists who follow the canonical interpretations of law and theology, neotraditionalists, moderate traditionalist-scripturalist reformists, radical scripturalist-foundationalists, those with modernizing tendencies, and many individuals who embody a hybrid of these inclinations.¹⁸

Establishment and antiestablishment religious scholars in Egypt, it should be noted, do not conduct their debates in the language of the constitutional provisions of modern Egypt. Rather, their main discourse is in the language of traditional Islamic political theology. Teachings and guidelines of Muslim political theology are used to figure out when a ruler (*imam*) is legitimate and the status of a ruler after being unseated. Despite the fact that Egypt has a version of democracy at work, the language of political theology provides built-in presumptions of autocracy.

The political theology shared widely among the religious scholars urges obedience and loyalty to the government in power on the pragmatic argument that

stability is preferable to revolution, instability, and lawlessness. When this pragmatic thread of premodern political theology was adopted by contemporary traditional authorities, they rarely gave attention to whether substantive values of justice, equality, the distribution of wealth, the welfare of the society, and the overall quality of life of the citizenry were provided for by the government. Principled premodern versions of political theology did pay attention to questions of justice, but the pragmatist tradition, a reflexive political theology that views power as an exclusive merit, prevailed historically and continues to do so in contemporary times. While this is true for most in theory, the Salafi Call group viewed the Mubarak and Sadat governments as illegitimate because these regimes did not enforce the Sharia. The goal of the Salafi Call group was to “ensure that post-Mubarak Egypt would not be a place where bearded men are arrested and tortured, improve the country’s deplorable standard of living, and make the Egyptian government Islamically legitimate.”¹⁹

It is not clear what prompted the ulama of al-Azhar to switch their loyalties and support the military in the June 2013 coup. What is important to recognize is that the clerical establishment in Egypt has a long history of patrimonial relationships with successive governments, as Malika Zehgal points out.²⁰ Despite the ideological diversity within al-Azhar, a core thread of its leadership always viewed the Brotherhood with suspicion. This attitude may have moderated over time as sections of the Azhar ulama became enchanted with the brand of political Islam promoted by the Brotherhood. High-visibility Azhar graduates who were also prominent members of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Muhammad al-Ghazali and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, made the Brotherhood acceptable in the eyes of later Azhar graduates. Yet, the orthodox core of al-Azhar viewed the Brotherhood’s process theology as resulting in political activism and so somewhat contrary to the mainstream Sunni tradition that effectively separated governance and religious authority.

Both the clerical establishment and political rulers often preferred the *modus operandi* of a quietist religious authority. Religious authority would only occasionally raise its prophetic voice in order to advise political rulers when they violated the governance norms of Islamic morality, but they hardly contemplated deposing a ruler. In Egypt’s new constitution al-Azhar effectively became the equivalent of Egypt’s official “church,” even though Egypt also had the office of the state mufti, the chief religious jurisconsult, who issued interpretations of Islamic law and signed off on death penalties.

It appears that Morsi’s Brotherhood government tried to win over al-Azhar by giving it autonomy and making it a source of religious authority by means of article 7. So the question arises: Why did al-Azhar switch loyalties as soon as Morsi faced democratic resistance?

Al-Azhar seems to have adopted the age-old political-theological pragmatism: In the event of a contest between two contenders, it is prudent to give loyalty to

whoever commands overwhelming authority (*shawka*).²¹ With the rise of popular sentiment against Morsi in large-scale demonstrations, al-Azhar threw away the constitutional rule book of democratic process and backed the multitude who invited the winning horse—namely, the army—to take power. Therefore, based on this logic, it made perfect sense to see the grand shaykh of al-Azhar, the Salafi leader, and the Coptic pope seated together at the inauguration of General Sisi after the elected president had been deposed. The Coptic pope most likely preferred a secular military government to an overtly Islamist political party ruling Egypt. It is also worth noting that, in the dying days of Mubarak's rule, the leadership of al-Azhar very reluctantly—and only at the eleventh hour—demonstrated their support for the revolutionary uprising against the dictator's rule. This reflects a long-established, pro-status quo, pragmatist Muslim political theology.

Opposition to the deposition of Morsi was evident in another version of Azhar orthodoxy that adopted a more principled approach to political theology and acknowledged the rules of the game defined by democratic and constitutional governance. Spontaneous groups, one calling itself “Ulama against the Coup,” claimed the support of several thousand Azhar scholars who signed a petition to proclaim the legitimacy of Morsi's presidency and protested his wrongful removal.

Interestingly, both the pragmatists and those who adopted a principled approach used the same argument either to support the June 30, 2013, coup deposing Morsi or to oppose it. Each side went back to the same event in the Islamic past, the insurrection of the Kharijites against the rule of Ali in the seventh century. The Kharijites' insurrection and rebellion against legitimate rule had given them infamy.

Shaykh Ali Goma, official mufti of Egypt till February 2013, was among the pragmatists who opposed the ousting of Mubarak and later also defended the overthrow of Morsi by the military. Addressing the military high command days after the June 30 coup, Goma equated the Muslim Brotherhood with the Kharijites and urged the armed forces of Egypt to use violence to subdue Morsi's supporters to whom he referred as the “dogs of hell.” As a deposed ruler, Goma opined, Morsi had forfeited his claim to legitimacy. The public appeal to the military to intervene on June 30, 2013, effectively made Sisi the legitimate ruler, given his exhibition of overwhelming force (*shawka*) as head of Egypt's armed forces. Yet a few years earlier, in November 2010, Dr. Ali Goma wrote: “Muslims are free to choose whichever system of government they deem most appropriate for them, provided they respect and uphold basic principles of equality, freedom and human dignity. Indeed, these principles for which liberal democracy stands are themselves part of the foundation for the Islamic world view; it is the achievement of this freedom and dignity within a religious context that Islamic law strives for.”²²

It becomes difficult to understand how the Goma, the lover of liberal democracy, could approve military rule and the use of lethal violence to subdue nonviolent protest. One explanation is that Islamic pragmatist norms of early political theology trumped the norms of democratic governance, especially in the absence of a reconciliation of the two.

Mounting a bruising critical attack on the coup was Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a leading religious figure based in the Gulf state of Qatar. Qaradawi took refuge in Qatar during the years when the Brotherhood was outlawed in Egypt. Among some Sunni Muslims he enjoys what comes close to a pontifical reputation thanks to his popular weekly show on Al Jazeera television called *Sharia and Life* in which he addresses issues of faith, law, ethics, and politics. In Qaradawi's view, General Sisi and the army resorted to insurrection (in the same manner as the Kharijites) by deposing a legitimately elected ruler. Qaradawi went even further and criticized the grand shaykh of al-Azhar for approving the military coup by endorsing General (now Field Marshal) Sisi's inauguration. Such a frontal attack is rare within the clerical establishment, and the recriminations between supporters and opponents of the two figures—Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb and Qaradawi—were ugly. Qaradawi, who was appointed to the Council of Senior Scholars of al-Azhar, resigned in protest from that council in the aftermath of his political disagreement with el-Tayeb, whom he claimed had resorted to political pragmatism in supporting the military leader of the June 30, 2013, coup. Egypt's new 2013 constitution guarantees the independence of al-Azhar, and the Council of Senior Scholars will in the future elect the new shaykh or president of this important institution of learning.

In Syria, too, one of the leading Sunni scholars, Shaykh Said Ramadan al-Buti, resorted to a political theology that supported the Bashar al-Assad regime in the wake of the uprisings in that country. Buti tried to assure the Sunni groups that it was in their best interest to support the Damascus government and engage in dialogue with the regime instead of opposing it. But when Syrian nonviolent protest spiraled into civil war, Buti continued to support the status quo. In the end he met a violent death in 2013 when a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device in the Damascus mosque where he was giving a class. Speculations abound regarding whether Buti was on the verge of defecting and about who really assassinated him—the militarized opposition groups who disagreed with him or the regime that might have gotten wind of his plans to defect. Nevertheless, in the absence of political stability and representative governance, the risk of chaos and the loss of life increases in the Middle East and North Africa.

Conclusion: A Return to the Ethical

The contemporary Tunisian thinker and philosopher Abu Yarub al-Marzuki repeatedly encourages his audiences to profit from the political insights of the

legendary North African polymath Abdurrahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). As the earliest protagonist of what we would today call sociology and political science, Ibn Khaldun receives credit for making us understand how societies work. He fully understood the negative impact authoritarianism and injustice had on the morale of society. “Injustice,” he wrote, “precipitates the ruin of civilization.”²³ When people are dispossessed of their property, are overtaxed, and have their rights infringed, then, in Ibn Khaldun’s view, they lose all incentive to better themselves and their societies.²⁴ Authoritarianism and tyranny contribute to the decline of society and the loss of opportunity, development, and well-being.

The Arab Spring has demonstrated that the people are determined to change their destiny through peaceful protests, uprisings, and, if necessary, bloody civil wars. But the revolutions have also been reversed in several places. It appears that while civil society can easily be mobilized, it also lacks the inner and deeper resources to make transformation a lasting process. In my view the real damage of decades of authoritarianism has been the denial of people’s opportunity to think and actualize the ethical teachings of their religions. Muslim societies are exposed to an ethical tradition of duty-based ethics (*fiqh*) that imposes some degree of restraint but does not actualize norms of autonomy that are located within self, community, and society. Reliance on a strong authority—the father, the cleric, or the political strongman—only reinforces patriarchal and paternalistic authority to the detriment of the productive values that every vibrant society needs.

In fact Marzuqi, like Kawakibi a century ago, is unique among contemporary Arab philosophers in identifying the ethical and knowledge deficit of Arab-Muslim societies. “We own neither an ethics nor knowledge” to mediate the crisis, he said in a fairly damning but honest assessment of the situation in 2008.²⁵ “Ethics is not merely to pronounce values,” Marzuqi said, “but to act upon them.” In a direct attack on authoritarianism he said, “Freedom allows the ethical to develop. . . . Freedom is the foundation of knowledge and ethics.”²⁶ Ibn Khaldun would most likely have agreed with Marzuqi. After authoritarianism has stripped away the purpose of life, it ultimately attacks the moral core of society and denatures it to the extent that the abnormal appears normal. It takes a revolution of another kind to rehabilitate the moral core of nations. But to echo Marzuqi’s analysis, any reconstruction begins with freedom and knowledge as the preconditions for the important but difficult journey of refashioning the morality of individuals and groups. Marzuqi might be right: In order for any future Arab Spring to flourish, it must begin with the individual and of necessity internalize an ethics based on freedom.

Notes

1. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 29.
2. *Ibid.*, 30.

3. Salem, "Challenging Authoritarianism, Colonialism, and Disunity."
4. See Akyol, "Turkey's Model Nation."
5. al-Ījī, al-Jurjānī, and 'Umayra, *Kitāb Al-Mawāqif*, 3:574–84.
6. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam*, 85.
7. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*.
8. Dāhīr, *al-Širāʿ bayna al-tayyāayn al-dīnī aa-al-ʿalmānī*, 370.
9. al-Ījī, al-Jurjānī, and 'Umayra, *Mawāqif*.
10. 'Abd al-Rāziq and Ḥaqqī, *al-Islām wa-uṣūl al-ḥukm*, 76.
11. al-Ījī, al-Jurjānī, and 'Umayra, *Mawāqif*, 3:574–78.
12. See Balqazīz, *State in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, esp. 37–44.
13. Moustafa, *Struggle for Constitutional Power*.
14. Kawākibī and 'Imara, *Ṭabāʿiʿ al-istibdād wa-maṣāriʿ al-istiʿbād*.
15. *Ibid.*, 82.
16. *Ibid.*, 46.
17. *Ibid.*, 45; emphasis added.
18. See Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*, 86–96.
19. Brown, "Rise and Fall of the Salafi Al-Nour Party in Egypt."
20. Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of Al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952–94)."
21. al-Azmeh, *Muslim Kingship*, 117.
22. Ali Gomaa, "Islam and Modernity."
23. Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 2:103.
24. *Ibid.*, 2:107.
25. Mūsā, "Munāzara dārat ishkālīyatuhā al-raʿīsiya ḥawla al-fikr al-dīnī wa al-falsafī fī muwājahat al-taḥaddiyāt al-rāhina."
26. *Ibid.*

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